



Photo: Ed Freeman

Rafa Sardina

Just when we thought we'd got the measure of him he's gone and added a further award at this year's Grammys to take his running total to ten; Rafa Sardina talks to NIGEL JOPSON about the specifics of Latin music, building a studio and starting his own label.

SARDINA RECEIVED HIS 10th Grammy (best Mexican-American album) for Luis Miguel's *Mexico En La Piel* at the 48th Grammy awards. Rafa also contributed to this year's Grammy winning performance (best male pop vocal) of Stevie Wonder. Acclaimed guitar player Alejandro Sanz's album *No Es Lo Mismo*, recorded by Sardina, won Record Of The Year, Album Of The Year, Song Of The Year, Best Male Pop Vocal Album and also took the trophy for Best Engineered Album at the 46th awards. Rafa began his audio career in the Basque region of Spain, playing guitar and bass and doing live sound for local folk and jazz performers. After moving to Los Angeles he served his apprenticeship as an engineer at Hollywood's Ocean Way and Record One studios, working with a diverse array of artists from the Rolling Stones to Ricky Martin and Rod Stewart. His big break as an

independent came when he scooped a gig engineering for superstar Luis Miguel, with whom he earned two Latin Grammy Awards in 2000, Album Of The Year and Best Pop Album, for *Amarte Es Un Placer*. He has now recorded seven albums for Miguel.

Sardina mixed Antonio Orozco's top ten album *El Principio del Comienzo*, which stormed into first place in the Spanish album charts on release in 2004, and its 2005 follow-up. Rafa has recorded a varied and impressive list of artists including Macy Gray, Dr Dre, Dru Hill, Sheryl Crow and Marc Antoine. He also worked on film soundtracks including *Any Given Sunday* and *102 Dalmatians*, and last June opened his *After Hours* studio adjacent to his home in Woodland Hills, where he was busy mixing the soundtrack for *Family Reunion*, a feature film from Lions Gate Entertainment, when *Resolution* interviewed him.

Did you record the music for this movie, or are you just mixing it?

On this project, we scored the whole movie in New Orleans with the New Orleans Symphony Orchestra at Piety Street Studios. It was quite an experience because they had not recorded a 40-piece orchestra before, I had to bring some equipment with me like the Decca tree and some M50 Neumanns. The movie studio had a commitment to helping New Orleans after hurricane Katrina, it had a lot to do with bringing business back to New Orleans. Even five months after the disaster, you would be amazed to see the condition of some of the neighbourhoods.

Was it a big investment setting up your studio to work to film?

I have a full 5.1 set-up and the capability to lock to any picture format. People don't realise what goes into building a studio because some of the most difficult and expensive parts are largely unseen. There's a big screen and everything is playing synced together, people don't really see the wiring and infrastructure behind that. At least half of the money I spent is somewhere behind the walls!

I see you are working on a ProControl ...

I have a beefed up Pro Tools rig with Apogee converters. I've been a big fan of Apogee for a long time. At the moment I have a ProControl, but I'm in the process of adding an analogue board, it will probably be one of the new SSL AWS900s. Although I use some plug-ins, I still hear the benefit of using my analogue EQs and dynamics — even reverbs — there are some wonderful pieces that work so well, so why switch? I have quite a few old Neves, 1073s and 1084s, a lot of API preamps, API graphics, and some old Sphere EQs. I also have two Eventide SP2016s which are one of my favourites, and I have an old AKG BX5 spring reverb. They become part of the sonic tools that you know how to apply to your productions.

How do you integrate all the outboard processors with your ProControl?

I have developed a way of working when I'm mixing where I use my converters as inserts. I have my own calculations of the processing delay, so I can slide things around to compensate. When you start using subgroups on drums and stuff like that it's a completely different ball game, it's not like working on an analogue board where everything is phase coherent. I calculated the delays for the Digidesign — I have some 192s — and for the Apogeos using a test tone, then I line up the before and after audio to find the processing delay.

I see your outboard hardware is not just confined to vintage analogue pieces ...

There are some truly amazing new hardware devices, like the Distressors and the Transient Designer. I sometimes use Transient Designer to change the sustain on a piano, or to change the hammer attack, it can really alter the way a keyboard sits in the track. Transient Designer can work well on other instruments besides those that are drum-like, although people tend to forget that sometimes. I also have the Sony sampling reverb, which I love, and the new Celemony Melodyne software can be a really creative tool.

How are you using the Melodyne?

I use it to develop new harmonic ideas, maybe to do funky stuff like triggering tones into percussive elements, I've even used it with a conga track. It all comes down to how much time you have to experiment. I like to try new things, but only one at



Photo: Kevin Scanlon

a time and when I can justify the time and purpose. If you try to introduce too many elements it can work out badly — it has happened to me that a band might rush out before a recording and all buy new instruments, new amps — and they haven't even figured out how to use them! It can sometimes be a step back rather than a step forward.

Do you find there are constant script and edit-driven music revisions involved with film soundtracks?

In the past I have, for example, been mixing some of the underscore and then — on the same day — I've had to book another room to record a jazz quartet to create a new cue. There's a lot of improvisation to it which I sort of like. There are high levels of restriction when they come back to you with their specific needs for a scene, but it drives your level of creativity up, and you get to work with many different styles of music — you might be working on an orchestral piece — then next it's an R&B track. Sometimes different producers handle this, but often it's the same team of people and I really enjoy that, you really get to exercise your chops. I have another movie I might be working on as executive producer for the music — it's a feature film about dancing, about old-school Salsa — so it has a lot of music!

Is your home studio recording space large enough for a live band?

My studio is not a huge tracking room, but it's big enough to record drums and a grand piano, I have recorded a jazz trio live in there. I tried to build my studio from the ground up as a state-of-the-art place, the good thing was I had some experience helping artists to specify and build their own studios, I built a couple of studios in Spain and a few more in L.A. I used Clayt Hudson for the acoustics and to help me realise the design. It's not really a 'home' studio, it just happens to be built next to my house! It's very well equipped, it's just not available for booking as a commercial facility.

Did you build your studio to bring in the film work, or was it part of a drive to develop new artists as a producer?

Until two years ago I was mainly engineering and mixing, since then my main focus has been producing. From the very beginning the whole philosophy of having a studio was to facilitate my work and the creativity of people I bring in. Right now I'm about to start my own small independent label with some partners. When you are working for a big label there are so many other factors that come into the equation. There are so many 'baby projects' at the major labels: you may produce several tracks for them — then they're never released — the label is just pitching the market! There's quite a lot of that sort of work happening these days.

Producing artists 'on spec' always raises the difficult issue of how to structure a contract to protect the producer's time and work, is having a record label a good means of formalising this relationship?

Having your own label does make this aspect of development much clearer. It also shows your further commitment to the artist. Even if you have a sort of 'guerrilla' attitude about how to promote your artist you still don't have the marketing and distribution resources, you will need to strike some sort of arrangement with a major to really be able to sell your product, it's not an easy task. Despite the new ways of promotion over the Internet, we still need

the traditional marketing and physical distribution muscle of a large corporation to reach a big audience. At the moment I'm finalising some agreements in that respect.

Is the outsourcing of artist development to producers like yourself a growing trend for the majors?

The whole landscape is getting smaller and smaller as the major labels get rid of so many of the resources they once had. The truth is, the majors just don't have the manpower these days to really go out and do proper scouting for new bands. Even when they find new artists, major labels are relying more and more on independent producers and smaller labels to jump in and develop the artist.

How do your development artists come to you?

From every possible way! There are two different styles of artist: there are those who don't write their own music, who will need a high degree of collaboration to be able to create music, who will require the whole nine yards. Then there are bands who already know the craft of making music, but need help to channel their efforts. You don't really get to choose which sort of artist you work with — you either like the music or you don't — you must respond to your instincts, and not worry beforehand about what it's going to take to really come out with a great final product.

Listening to Luis Miguel's Mexico, the album you won the Grammy for, it sounds like he really took the range of his vocal performance up for that record.

It was a very special album for him: those songs are truly part of his roots, he was born in Puerto Rico, but he grew up in Mexico. He always included mariachi music in his live performances, but he had never released a mariachi album. It was really in his heart and his blood.

I believe the band you used, Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán, is very famous?

They have been active since 1895 — over a 100 years — non-stop. They are the oldest existing mariachi group, it was a fantastic experience because some of the players had been with the group for 50 years! We recorded them at Ocean Way Studio B.

Do you find acts are encouraged to come to you because of your success as a Grammy-winning engineer?

Many people know me because of my Latin work — even though it may not have been my main line of work — but I have had most success, or recognition, with that genre. When I got a job at Ocean Way Studios I was exposed to do so many different kinds of music, from orchestra work through the Black Crows, to Frank Sinatra and Barbara Streisand. I was lucky enough to get a big break with Luis Miguel, but at the time I was working on a lot of R&B music with Dr Dre, Dru Hill and so on. My label really reflects that, I'm developing a hip-hop R&B artist right now.

I get the feeling guys like Antonio Orozco may have been listening to bands like Weezer or Goldfinger ... and these new influences are emerging in the work of a new generation of Latin artists.

Yes, the landscape has really changed in Latin music, even though it's still a bit more conservative than most markets. This means more work for artists and producers who want to make a change, because obviously they find there's a bit of a reaction against



At Chalice Studios
Photo: TheC

them for trying to move forward, but it's very satisfying seeing many artists ... 'being allowed' ... to do something different that reflects what's happening in other world markets — like Britain!

When I was in Chile recently, I was quite surprised to hear Andrea Echeverri singing to sampled beats and filtered sequences on her new album.

It's funny that you've highlighted this artist, because she was a singer with a very famous Chilean band, Aterciopelados, before she went solo. In order to do that, she had to come here to LA from Chile and sign with an independent label based here called Nacional Records. She had to go the indie route to be able to release material in the style she really wanted — which doesn't mean she won't want to eventually switch to a major label to reach a bigger audience. Artists have become more educated about the process of making music, about what it means to work with a producer. These days I find that artists know more about what they need to do to get signed, or to create a buzz in the business. Before, this used to be a rather obscure area,

nobody would talk about it and the business side was something that happened behind closed doors.

So you're very busy mixing film scores, recording Grammy-winning albums with major artists, building studios, song writing, developing new artists, starting a label ... are you doing all this on your own?

I have a team of people I collaborate with, some arrangers I work with, a couple of people I co-produce with. Otherwise it would be impossible! I also have two assistant engineers — who work independently — I call them for different projects if I need them. I'm quite good at time-managing myself. If you think that you are going to be able to mix and match and do a little bit of this and a little bit of that, you really won't get the results. You have to force yourself to be very specific about your schedule: for this day I will work on this — then the second half of the day I will work on this other project — and then you must commit yourself to really doing that. Sometimes you must commit to not answering the phone, you have to be 100%! ■